

## **Communication Key to Emergency Response**

**By Gov. Dave Heineman**

Dear Friends and Fellow Nebraskans:

This past week I had a chance to celebrate the first fruits of cooperative efforts that a group of dedicated Nebraskans began while I was serving as Lieutenant Governor and also as our state's first Director of Homeland Security.

Nebraska's decision to work with local units of government and first responders to spend federal Homeland Security money on communications equipment will allow our police, fire and rescue agencies to communicate with one another during a crisis.

The celebration I joined in Kearney last week marked the official advancement of the Central Nebraska Region for Interoperability (CNRI). CNRI is an expanding organization of 10 counties in central Nebraska that has worked together to communicate.

What most Nebraskans might not know is that the same communications problems that kept New York City's police and fire departments from being able to share information during the response to Sept. 11, 2001, is a problem nationwide.

Despite some notable exceptions – many agencies in Douglas County, Lancaster County and the Panhandle can communicate with one another, although not all – interoperable communication remains a goal and not a reality in most places.

Until technological improvements in recent years, interoperable communications systems would have required the expensive replacement of nearly every piece of radio equipment that Nebraska's first responders carry.

Thank goodness for continued innovation. The same technology that allows Nebraskans to make telephone calls over the Internet also allows the varied radio systems to be patched for emergency communications across different bands and brands.

I am oversimplifying the process, but this new technology will allow first responders and local governments to use their existing radio networks and dispatch equipment while enhancing their ability to speak across city, county and jurisdictional lines.

Events like the Oklahoma City bombing, Columbine, Sept. 11 and Katrina have taught us that large-scale emergencies will tax not only the affected jurisdictions, but all available emergency response resources. No one agency has the tools, people, and resources needed to address a major tragedy. Therefore,

cooperation and interoperable communications are keys to an effective emergency response.

As our state approached these communication challenges, Nebraskans realized that the difficulties of integrating our public safety wireless communications had more to do with governance and management than technology.

The state has adopted a regional planning approach for creating, then integrating these hub radio systems like the CNRI, and that approach will serve as a foundation for our ultimate and achievable goal: truly interoperable statewide communications.

My budget includes funding to upgrade the communications capabilities of the Nebraska State Patrol, the Game and Parks Commission's Law Enforcement officers and the radios of the State Fire Marshal's Office. This communications initiative will ultimately form the backbone of our efforts to connect the regions and integrate our statewide efforts.

The state is coordinating with every region to improve communications capabilities and to assist them in their efforts to work with neighboring regions. State oversight and planning is ensuring that communications systems are functional and sustainable.

One day soon, a police officer in North Platte will be able to communicate with a regional trooper from the Nebraska State Patrol, as well as with police agencies in Nebraska communities like Scottsbluff, Holdrege, Grand Island and Lincoln.

Establishing such a system is cost effective, serves the interests of first-responders and protects Nebraskans.